MALIGNANT READINGS: THE CASE OF ARMAH'S CRITICS

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> It is true that if I ever wrote the things I have seen and stories that have passed through my mind they would immediately come to me, asking with unbelief how any son of the land, no matter how low he had fallen, could do such a grave disservice to the revolution ... (**Why Are We So Blest?**, p. 4)

The Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah has probably attracted more adverse criticism than any other African novelist. This is perhaps not surprising, given the denunciatory tone in his novels, and his tendency to depict ugly scenes with extraordinary frankness. Many critics have reacted strongly to Armah's imagery or to what they see as a contemptuous and scornful attitude to Africa. Some readers have also objected to the apparent absence of a clearly positive message or a didactic element in Armah's three novels.

Reviewing **The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born** soon after its publication, Eldred Jones predicted that the language Armah had chosen would be "a stumbling block for many people" (1). He was right. In her introduction to the Collier-Macmillan edition of Armah's first novel, Ama Ata Aidoo, the Ghanaian playwright, expressed objections to that novel's putrescent imagery. She saw no need, she declared, for smearing every page with "the excrement and smells of Ghana". She argued that Ghana was in fact not as dirty as Armah had depicted it. "One has encountered similar and even worse physical decay in other parts of the world." Aidoo further complained that "whatever is beautiful and genuinely pleasing in Ghana or about Ghanaians seems to have gone unmentioned in **The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born**" (2). Likewise, the Ugandan critic Shatto Gakwandi has lamented that "the senses of the reader are vigorously

assaulted to the point of being numbed by the persistent imagery of decay" (3). Similar complaints have come from other readers who have found some of Armah's imagery hard to stomach.

A number of African critics have upbraided Armah for what they see as his preoccupation with existentialist themes that are, in their view, alien to Africa. African society, according to these critics, is incompatible with the emergence of such miscreants as the anonymous hero of **The Beautyful Ones.** Most prominent among these critics is the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, who, while praising Armah's literary talent, has accused him of falsifying African reality in the service of what he considers a foreign aesthetic. Armah's first novel, according to Achebe, is "a sick book" which portrays a modish existentialist misery for which Ghana is not ready. Ghana, he says, "is not a modern existentialist country" (4). He continues: "Ayi Kwei Armah imposes so much foreign metaphor on the sickness of Ghana that it ceases to be true". Achebe does not provide any specific examples of the "foreign metaphor", nor does he indicate in what way he would want Armah's portrayal to be "true". Indeed he does little more than hurl epithets at Armah, calling him an "alienated native" who writes "like some white District Officer". Achebe has repeated his remarks on more than one occasion, an indication perhaps of how strongly he holds his views. (5)

Achebe's description of Armah has been echoed rather glibly by another Nigerian critic, Ben Obumselu, who sees Armah as expressing "the aesthetic discomfort of an American tourist" (6). It is not clear whether the American tourist is chosen because of any brand of "aesthetic discomfort" peculiar to that particular species, or because Armah happens to have spent some time in America. However, as with Achebe, the object of attack appears to be some perceived alien sensibility which is unwelcome to Africa. At times it seems Armah's very sanity is questioned. Obumselu confidently diagnoses Armah's disorder as a "misanthropic neurosis", an affliction which is apparently characteristic of an "exiled imagination".

Leonard Kibera, the Kenyan writer, also thinks Armah's first novel reveals no less than the author's total contempt for Africa itself. He calls **The Beautyful Ones** "a work of vengeance", although he does not tell us what it is Armah

is supposed to be avenging (7). Armah, says Kibera, "cultivates pessimism as meticulously as the undertaker touches up a dead face for the viewing procession". He also compares Armah with Achebe, and finds the former wanting. Unfortunately, Kibera is so intent on passing judgement that he sometimes misreads the text. For instance, he says of Koomson that "we see him as the eunuch who hollers meaninglessly '...ricaa!!!', the hermit who has become irrelevant" (8). In the passage referred to the Teacher is turning the knob of his radio, searching for a station, while the man watches the movement of the red pointer on the radio. The sentence reads: "When it stopped a male voice, huge like a eunuch amplified, burst the air with a hollered sound that kept its echo long afterward, a vibrating '...ericaaa!'" (p. 61). Kibera does not seem to realize that all this sentence tells us is that the Teacher had accidentally tuned to the Voice of America, and that the reference to the eunuch is no more than a simile aimed at stressing the shrillness of the announcer's voice.

Also taking his cue from Achebe is another Nigerian critic, Charles Nnolim. In his article titled "Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah", Nnolim says his aim is "to demonstrate that Armah is a writer whose creative vision reveals a delight with scenes of defeat, frustration, disappointment and loss" (9). He, too, has some labels for Armah: the author of **The Beautyful Ones** is "a dark writer", "a writer of decadence" who, "to everyone's disgust", takes great pleasure in depicting images of decay and corruption. Although he uses the terms "pejorism" and "pejoristic" in almost every other line, one is never quite sure what he means. Citing Achebe, Nnolim claims that **The Beautyful Ones** is inauthentic because it is set "in no-man's land", and that Armah mentions Nkrumah and a few other Ghanaian names "as a camouflage". He continues:

> The point is that the novel, such as it is, has nothing essentially Ghanaian about it: no specifically Ghanaian mannerisms, or special brand of politics, no language in the local idiom of the people (as we have in Achebe's **Things Fall Apart**), and the major events in the novel never take place in any wellknown geographical or political centres in Ghana. (10)

From this it looks as if Nnolim's real reason for being disappointed in Armah is that the latter does not write like Achebe, whom Nnolim appears to hold up as the model against whom to judge all other novelists. In the process of his dubious assessment he creates his own fictions about Armah's first novel.

Without accepting his assumptions of what constitutes realism or verisimilitude, one can demonstrate that the world of **The Beautyful Ones** is in fact very Ghanaian indeed. A truly Ghanaian "brand of politics" is recognizable not only in Nkrumah but also in the CPP, the UGCC, the "lawyers", the "international schools", Winneba and "socialism", and in many other things. The very title of the novel is Ghanaian, having been inspired by the slogans that are apparently a common sight in Ghanaian cities (11). Anybody who has read the novel knows that there are more than just "a few Ghanaian names" in it; in fact, names are an important aspect of Armah's characterization in that novel and in all the later ones. Only someone who has lived in Ghana would be able to say whether or not the mannerisms of Armah's first novel are Ghanaian, but that is immaterial. What is important is that Armah's characters display tendencies that are recognizably human, while also serving Armah's fictional purposes.

As for "local idiom", Armah does not have to write like Achebe to capture the idiom of Accra. African novelists who have chosen to write in English have tried various ways to solve the problem of verisimilitude in narrative idiom and dialogue. Achebe remains probably the most successful in his use of proverbs and what might be called a truly traditional Igbo narrative idiom, both of which are appropriate for his rural settings. His use of pidgin in **No Longer at Ease** and **A Man of the People** is also quite in line with the urban settings of these novels. Many African writers have tried these, and other, methods of Africanizing the English language in their writing, with varying degrees of success and failure. In the end, the fact always remains that these writers are writing in English, a language not understood, let alone spoken, by the majority of their countrymen. The ultimate solution would be to write in one's mother tongue, although even that would not guarantee an author's ability to capture the popular idiom. In Armah's first three novels the narrative is so much based on quiet reflection that it would not make sense to render it in any sort of "local idiom".

Armah does use some pidgin in the dialogue in **The Beautyful Ones,** but only sparingly, very likely because for him the ability to reach as many people as possible is more important than any linguistic authenticity. I believe the same motivation lies behind his switch to a simpler, "oral" idiom in the last two novels.

Nnolim's criticism is at times notable for its virtual impenetrability. Here is an example:

> It will also be shown that Armah buttresses and reinforces his centre (eventually pejoristic or pessimistic) through his setting (invariably a corrupt Ghana); his characterization (corrupt men and women); his figurative language (full of irony, anticlimax, bathos, understatement, counterpoint, and reductive imagery). It will also be shown that his characterization is deflationary rather than inflationary, and the repertoire of his rhetoric lacks the imagery of enhancement, hope, progress, augmentation, or increase, but rather we have the imagery of defeat, decay, frustration, disappointment, shrinking, and dwindling - all subsumed under the figurative language called bathos - since in pejorism all movement is anticlimactically pointed. (12)

In his discussion of **The Beautyful Ones,** Nnolim says the conductor at the beginning of the novel "spat", when it is in fact the driver who spits (13). He even alleges that the man "takes an active part in promoting corruption and evil", simply because he becomes party to bribery as he helps Koomson escape after the **coup.** In his discussion of **Fragments** Nnolim claims that Naana is disappointed in Baako, whereas she is the only member of his family who understands and is sympathetic to him. In **Why Are We So Blest?** he misses the sarcasm in Modin's remark to Aimee that he is "hoping for a highly paid job as a subversive element" (p. 177); Nnolim apparently takes the remark seriously, seeing it as another instance of Armah's "pejorism".

In some passages Nnolim sounds as if he were discussing a different novel altogether:

> Aimee's experiences in Africa end on a bathetic note. Her ambition, tinged with enthusiasm, to obtain a job with the PVC, so that she and Modin can continue their revolutionary dreams, ends in disillusionment. **At the UPC Offices she is raped.** And when Aimee, who has come to Africa to live and practise the life of a revolutionary, decides to go home to democratic and bourgeois America, her disillusionment and frustration has [**sic**] reached rock bottom. And all of Modin's relationships end on an anticlimactic note: **in addition to breaking with the Portuguese girl Sylvia on the night of their engagement,** he has broken with his benefactors Professor Jefferson and Mr. Oppenhardt. At the very end, he has begun calling Aimee a racist and they have begun to go their separate ways. (14) (my emphasis)

Nnolim has, of course, got it wrong: no rape takes place at the UPC offices, and it is Solo who has a Portuguese girlfriend, not Modin. With this kind of blatant misreading it is perhaps no wonder that Nnolim finds only "pejorism" in Armah's novels. But instead of demonstrating Armah's "pejorism" as he promises to, Nnolim succeeds only in revealing a prejudice against the author which can mislead his readers.

Like Achebe, Nnolim concedes that Armah is a talented writer, but he strongly objects to "the insensitivity in Armah's language in which there is a lack of discriminating taste and, one must say, a lack of class" (15). What we have here is evidence that Armah's attack on the "new men" of Africa has hit its mark. Armah would almost certainly be delighted with Nnolim's accusation, for it is precisely the kind of "class" that Nnolim appears to extol that is always under fire in Armah's fiction. Nnolim's class-consciousness becomes evident in his reading of **Fragments,** when he claims that "Baako suffers **the ultimate humiliation** of having **mere**

taxi drivers refuse him their services because he seems a nobody" (my emphasis).

"Class" also seems to be a factor for those who find Armah's explicit descriptions of love-making offensive. In a discussion of **Two Thousand Seasons** Emmanuel Ngara has lamented Armah's "lack of consideration for the reader" in often using what Ngara considers to be "pornographic" language (16). Oyekan Owomoyela has even asserted that Armah's love-making scenes are "un-African". The portrayal of sex, he says, is "an audacious departure from African expectations" (17). It may well be true that sex is as taboo a subject in African societies as it is in most other parts of the world; but taboos are surely a poor standard for judging works of art.

Other critics have underlined Armah's supposed "un-Africanness" by attributing his literary style to foreign influences. Lewis Nkosi, for instance, says of the imagery in **The Beautyful Ones:**

> One supposes that this phenomenological kind of piecemeal description of the organic world owes a lot of its glowing vivacity to readings of existential writers ... but another obvious influence is Dickens, whose novels Armah read at Harvard. (18)

Nkosi does not tell us why Armah should be incapable of producing "glowing vivacity" without any help from Dickens, or why it should not be traced to what Armah actually saw in Ghana; nor is there any indication why Dickens' influence should be "obvious", whether or not Armah actually read that author at Harvard or elsewhere.

I do not wish to pretend that Armah has not been influenced by anyone. But the trouble with influence-hunting is that people may often see influence where it does not exist. Many of Armah's critics bring their own previous reading to his work, and then mistake the associations they make for influence. There is nothing wrong with finding and discussing influences, but in the case of Armah it might be better to confine the exercises to those figures who are actually mentioned or cited in his writing, such as Fanon, Marx, Mannheim, Bacon, Carson McCullers, Doris Lessing,

et al., and to those influences that can actually be shown to be obvious.

Another critic who questions Armah's fidelity to Africa is Ezekiel Mphahlele, the South African writer. Like many of the other critics, Mphahlele compares Armah's first novel with the Ghana he has seen, and finds a lot missing. Achebe had asked where the "High Life" of Ghana was, or "the gaiety and warmth of collective experience". Mphahlele uses almost exactly the same words: "There is little if any of the abundance of life, the gaiety and zest for life one finds in Accra, in spite of the power game among those at the top" (19). The suggestion here seems to be that there is only one way of looking at Accra. Mphahlele also gives the impression that the "zest for life" is totally divorced from the power game, which he would have us believe happens only among those at the top.

Not to be outdone by the other critics, Mphahlele, too, compares Armah unfavourably with Achebe. "Achebe and (Mongo) Beti obviously love people," he declares, contrasting this with "Armah's apparent lack of love for people" (20). Armah, Mphahlele prescribes, should tone down his satire in favour of comedy. "Our African audiences," he explains, "at this point in history, it would seem, tend to frown on, and even dismiss, any abrasive ridicule levelled at personalities and myths they revere or once revered" (21). Once upon a time Africans used to rise up in arms whenever some colonial anthropologist made this kind of paternalistic statement; it even sounds like one of the many derogatory generalizations about Africans made by spokesmen of **apartheid** in Mphahlele's own country. But even if one forgives Mphahlele for what must surely be a slip, the by-now-tiresome assertion that a writer should give to his readers only what they expect is simply prescriptive criticism at its worst. Armah himself has some sarcastic things to say about critics like Mphahlele and Owomoyela, whom he calls "skilful interpreters":

> The skilful interpreter functions in close tune with the allergies, aspirations, ideals, manias, philias, phobias and prejudices - above all the prejudices of his audience. The skilful interpreter knows how to respect and protect his audience's prejudices. Operating almost

> by instinct, he censors information before he transmits it. If any of this information threatens to clash too pointedly with his audience's sensibilities, he prudently blunts its point and turns it harmlessly aside, if he cannot bury it altogether. And if any particular item of information flatters his audience's sensibilities, he strengthens its impact. If any item reinforces his audience's prejudices, he strengthens its point. If there is a shortage of flattering information the really skilful interpreter creates useable items of surrogate information. The skilful interpreter, in short, does not allow information to ruffle his audience's sensibilities. He uses information to reinforce his audience's prejudices. (22)

But Mphahlele does not stop at merely "protecting" the prejudices of his audience. He goes on to make generalizations which echo Achebe's pronouncements on existentialism:

> I don't know if we shall one day arrive at the excruciating point felt by the European existentialist. For now it would seem that the existentialist image of the African human scene is too literary to penetrate reality, through the single melody of one man's loneliness or aloneness. It ignores the public rhetoric, the chorus that abound [**sic**] in Africa, and which absorb suffering. (23)

The "rhetoric" and "chorus" which Armah's protagonists are always denouncing are, for Mphahlele, cause for celebration because they "absorb suffering". Mphahlele seems to have accepted without reflection Achebe's claim that Armah's first novel is existentialist, and this absence of reflection is evident in his use of phrases of dubious meaning, such as his reference to the "existentialist image" as being "too literary to penetrate reality".

It is not only African critics who have misread Armah's novels or been offended by his vision. One would have expected that non-African critics might offer a more distanced perspective, but such is the breadth of coverage of Armah's fiction that they, too, find something to object to in it. Like a number of his African counterparts, Robert Fraser finds grounds for criticism in the extent to which Armah has allegedly been influenced by external sources. Fraser expresses the belief that Armah's first three novels show "a certain dependence on notions and obsessions arising ultimately from the European Romantic tradition" (24). As for the radicalism in some of Armah's novels, Fraser assures us that it reflects what he calls "extreme black American apologetics, especially ... that brand of it which flourished in the years of racial confrontation in the early sixties". (25)

Non-African critics, too, produce epithets that seek to sum up Armah once and for all. According to James Booth, for instance, Armah is "a figure of negativity in African literature" (26). Borrowing a handy phrase from none other than Chinua Achebe, Booth calls Armah's writing a case of "malignant fiction", and accuses him of being "ruthlessly reductive". The reason for this denunciation appears to lie in the views expressed by Solo and Modin in Armah's third novel. Booth writes: "At the bottom of **Why Are We So Blest?** lies the ultimately sentimental desire to blame all the problems of the contemporary African on the whites." Does Armah in fact have this "sentimental desire" himself? The answer might be yes if the views expressed by Solo and Modin are assumed to be those of Armah himself. Booth appears to make this assumption, perhaps because Armah's own experiences parallel those of Modin and Solo to some extent. But whatever the merits of such an assumption, it is hard to see how Booth reaches the conclusion he does in the face of the fact that Solo and Modin are as critical of fellow Africans as they are of imperialists. In any case the kind of anger Armah's work has provoked among African critics would seem to belie Booth's claim.

Booth's tendency to equate the views of Armah's characters with those of their creator extends to his reading of **Two Thousand Seasons.** After quoting Idawa's remark that "everybody knew a fat body was always the house of a rotten soul", he asks: "Does Armah himself believe this?" Booth's problem here is that he takes Idawa's statement

at face value, just as he sees the characterization of Aimee as implying that Armah believes all white women are sadomasochists. In fact, not even Idawa herself necessarily believes that a fat body houses a rotten soul. Hers is a figurative statement meant to serve the expressive function that all other metaphors serve in Armah's work. The phrase "everybody knew" provides a clue to the nature of the statement: it is an appeal to collective wisdom and, as a kind of proverb, is not meant to be taken literally.

The anti-imperialist strain in Armah's fiction has also provoked criticism from Bernth Lindfors of Austin, Texas. Lindfors calls Armah's first three novels "misanthropic narratives", which reminds one of Obumselu's diagnosis of "misanthropic neurosis", and of Mphahlele's assertion that Armah has an "apparent lack of love for people". According to Lindfors **The Healers** is a "saner piece of fiction", and Armah the would-be healer "gives signs of having himself been cured" (27). But Lindfors nevertheless has some very negative things to say about Armah's two most recent novels as well. What Lindfors appears to object to most of all in these novels are two things: the advocacy of egalitarianism and the denunciation of imperialism. "It is tempting," he writes, "to read current Tanzanian political ideology into such fictions because the emphasis in both is on brotherhood, sharing, self-reliance and unity" (28). Lindfors' reason for making this connection is the fact that Armah happened to be in Tanzania when the two books were published. **Post hoc, ergo propter hoc.** But surely there is nothing peculiarly Tanzanian about the values of brotherhood, sharing, self-reliance and unity. It is mischievous to suggest, as Lindfors does, that in writing **Two Thousand Seasons** Armah was "trying to justify the ways of TANU to man by creating a legendary prehistory of Ujamaa" (29). The ideas expressed in Armah's two most recent novels are also to be found in his earlier writing; all Armah does is to place more emphasis on them in these admittedly more didactic works. As for Armah's views on socialism, they are clearly spelt out in his essay on "African Socialism", published years before he ever went to Tanzania. In that essay Armah included Nyerere's **Ujamaa** and Senghor's **Negritude** among the "sloganeering gimmicks" which passed for political ideology in Africa. He wrote:

> The creed [**Ujamaa**], such as it is, is as rich in sacerdotal sanctimonious piety as it is poor in political realism.

> Its ideas of society are the sort of simplistic formulae dispensed by the less astute religious orders. It is distinguished by a horrified denial of social conflict and a chauvinistic assertion that Africans have nothing to learn about Socialism. (30)

Why, it might be asked, did Armah go to Tanzania after making such an assessment of **Ujamaa**? Only Armah can give a definite answer to such a question, but it is possible that, in view of the international attention which the Tanzanian experiment had attracted, he wanted to see things for himself, and perhaps participate in whatever was going on if he thought it was worthwhile. If so, that would not be the first time Armah did something of the kind. He went to Algiers in 1963 shortly after the Algerian revolution, very likely because he thought something positive and creative was taking place there. Judging from **Why Are We So Blest?** what he saw in Algeria appears to have disappointed him, although it does not seem to have shaken his ideals. All Armah's writings show a deep concern with pan-African issues, and this interest is, I suggest, reflected in his travels to various parts of Africa.

Lindfors joins the long list of those who compare Armah with Achebe and find the vision of the latter more acceptable, particularly with regard to colonialism:

> In **Things Fall Apart** and **Arrow of God** Achebe shows us samples of human beings entangled in a web of circumstances that ultimately brings disaster to rural Igbo society. The individuals portrayed cannot be divided into two camps—the saints versus the sinners--but rather can be recognized as quite ordinary people motivated by fairly commonplace ambitions and desires. Moreover, the communities in which they live are not perfect or even remotely perfectible; they are rife with conflicts ranging from the petty to the profound, conflicts which are exacerbated when an alien civilization intrudes into their relatively encapsulated world. The

> ensuing interaction between Europe and Africa is not really a species of all-out war but rather an uneasy, and at times unpeaceful, coexistence of differing world-views in which the inability of one side to comprehend the perspective of the other precipitates tragedy. Achebe perceives that it was a failure of communication, not an absence of humanity, that was responsible for certain of the catastrophes of the colonial period. In documenting the numerous ironies of this confused era with such compassion and lucidity Achebe proves a more convincing historian than Armah. Achebe deeply understands ethnocentrism, whereas Armah shallowly advocates it. (31)

Whether or not Achebe is a more convincing historian than Armah depends on one's perspective, but it is doubtful that even Achebe himself would agree with this domestication of colonialism. Colonialism was much more than an "interaction between Europe and Africa". It was the subjugation, humiliation and exploitation of one group of human beings by another group which was bent on conquest. Such scholars as Jahoda, Mannoni, Memmi, Fanon, Rodney and others have shown that the relationship between colonizer and colonized was based on anything but "the uneasy, and at times unpeaceful, coexistence of differing world-views". It was a profoundly antagonistic relationship, based as it was on the denial of the humanity of whole races. The repercussions of the psychological and social damage wrought by colonial ideology and praxis are still with us today, and no amount of distortion and rewriting of history can change the facts.

In fairness to Lindfors it must be said that many of the observations he makes on **The Healers** are quite perceptive, and his criticism of Armah's characterization in that novel is to some extent valid (i.e., only to the extent that we treat that work as being in the tradition of realistic fiction). But from the tone of Lindfors' article it seems clear that ideological prejudice plays an important part in his appreciation (or lack of it) of Armah's work. He indirectly castigates Densu in **The Healers** for not believing

in "individual achievement". Poor Densu: all he is against, as far as I can see, is the excessive competition that elevates individual self-interest above co-operation and unity. Lindfors even manages to see significance in the fact that the healers in the fifth novel live "in the **eastern** forest". It is not clear what connotations he reads into the word "eastern"; but perhaps what he sees in it is nothing more ominous than an allusion to the East African country of Tanzania.

It is not only these critics who are guilty of sloppy reading and insufficient attention to detail. In a discussion of **The Beautyful Ones,** Terry Goldie, a Canadian critic, writes: "When Estella goes to the lavatory to answer 'Nature's call', she is confronted by a man's constipation" (32). It is in fact Koomson, not Estella, who visits the lavatory, in what must be one of the most memorable episodes in the novel. Goldie also has the man fall, when he merely slips as he descends from the bus. Later, Goldie speaks of the man as having seen "two men from the south who have come to the metropolis to make their fortune". The text actually reads: "Two men from far away, lost in the mazes of the south" (p. 103). Given the location of Accra, a port city on Ghana's southern coast, the two men could hardly have come from the south unless they came from the sea. In fact, the context suggests they are from the north.

It would be folly to expect every critic to be sympathetic to Armah. There is much in his work that various readers may disagree with. There is much that many would find offensive. There are also weaknesses in Armah's writing that it is the business of the critic to point out. But one is entitled to ask that critics base their comments on what is actually there.

Of the many comparisons of Armah with Achebe, I believe that Simon Simonse's provides the most convincing assessment:

> Both Laye and Achebe write on the basis of a painful awareness that some reality they were once part of, or might have been part of, has been lost. They have no clear conception of the adverse forces. In their vision these forces are external to the African world they are trying to describe. Armah writes

> on the basis of an - even more painful awareness that these adverse forces have been victorious. In his novels it is the African tradition that has become external to the world he describes.(33)

It is probably going too far to say, particularly in the case of Achebe, that he has "no clear conception of the adverse forces". He is simply not preoccupied with them to the extent that Armah is. Whereas Achebe and Laye write about the clash of cultures caused by colonialism, Armah depicts the aftermath of that clash, and shows us the "connectedness" between things with which those two authors do not deal.

The remarks made by Achebe and those who echo his views are based on the questionable assumption that terms like "alienation" describe conditions which are foreign to Africa. Alienation and isolation, so the argument goes, are peculiar to the twentieth-century Western world. Things are different in African society, which abounds with inexhaustible goodwill and humanity. There would be no point in denying that African culture is different from Western culture. However, Achebe is wrong in claiming that such experience as Armah depicts in his novels is so foreign to Africa as to be irrelevant. There is no such thing as an "existentialist country", and in any case none of Armah's novels can be said to be in the existentialist tradition. The existentialists, particularly the followers of Kierkegaard, saw the alienation from which man suffers as an incurable fact of the human condition. They pictured man as eternally torn and tormented by irreconcilable aims and impulses, doomed to despair and disappointment in the unending war between his deepest spiritual aspirations and his insuperable limitations as an earthbound mortal. There is nothing in Armah's vision as it is articulated in his fiction which suggests that he subscribes to this view. On the contrary, the evidence in his work indicates that he sees the alienation that cripples and warps his characters as having ascertainable historical causes. The grotesqueness he depicts does not spring from any intrinsic inescapable evil in the nature of mankind as a species, as the existentialists or Christians would argue. It is generated by specific historical and social conditions which, because they were produced by man, can also be undone by man.

In reacting in a hostile manner to Armah's work the so-called African literary establishment has merely illustrated something very familiar in Africa: a chronic inability to take criticism. They have tended to interpret Armah's writing in a context of misanthropy, seeing him as a wanton destroyer and his work as an example of nihilistic abjuration. As we have seen, some have diagnosed disorders in Armah as a person. This tendency to explain away offensive works of art by tracing their peculiarities back to some physical, psychic or social disorder in the artist himself is not new. In English literature, for example, certain critics have sought to diffuse the satiric power of such writers as Swift, Pope, Ben Jonson, Byron or Orwell by emphasizing Swift's "madness", Pope's hunchback, Jonson's toilet-training, Byron's family history and experience of ostracism, and Orwell's painful childhood. Going hand in hand with this "biographical" approach is the mirror approach, which examines the picture of a society constructed in a given literary work, compares it with other, non-literary views of the same society, and then concludes that the writer is at best exaggerating and at worst lying for some sinister reason (e.g. "vengeance"). And so, according to such critics, Juvenal's Rome could not possibly have been as debauched and dirty as he paints it. Therefore there must have been something wrong with the man who constructed such a grotesque version of the Rome of the Caesars, and there must be something wrong with the man who constructed such an ugly version of Nkrumah's Accra. In my view, Armah has had more than his fair share of this kind of criticism.

NOTES

1. Eldred Jones, "Review", **African Literature Today,** 2 (1969), p. 57.

2. Ama Ata Aidoo, Introduction to Ayi Kwei Armah, **The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born** (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), p. xii.

3. S.A. Gakwandi, **The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa** (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 87.

4. Chinua Achebe, **Morning Yet on Creation Day** (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 25-6.

5. Achebe apparently first made the remarks in a lecture at Harvard in 1972. He repeated them in another lecture at the University of Washington in 1973, published in **In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka,** ed. Karen Morell (Seattle: African Studies Program, 1975), pp. 3-23.

6. Ben Obumselu, "Marx, Politics and the African Novel", **Twentieth Century Studies,** 10 (1973), pp. 114-16. Quoted by Bernth Lindfors in "Armah's Histories", **African Literature Today,** 11, ed. E.D. Jones (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp. 85-6.

7. L. Kibera, "Pessimism and the African Novelist", **Journal of Commonwealth Literature,** 14, No. 1 (1974), pp. 64-71.

8. **Ibid.,** p. 69.

9. Charles Nnolim, "Dialectic as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah", **African Literature Today,** 10 (1979), p. 207.

10. **Ibid.,** p. 209.

11. As is well known, the titles of Achebe's first two novels, **Things Fall Apart** and **No Longer at Ease,** are taken from Yeats' "The Second Coming" and T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" respectively.

12. Nnolim, pp. 207-8.

13. Another Nigerian critic, Kolewale Ogunbesan, makes a similar error in connection with the driver's spitting, in his "Symbol and Meaning in **The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born**", **African Literature Today,** 7 (1975), p. 20.

14. Nnolim, p. 222.

15. **Ibid.,** p. 223.

16. E. Ngara, **Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel** (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 130.

17. Oyekan Owomoyela, **African Literatures: An Introduction** (Altham, Massachusetts: African Studies Association, 1979), p. 110.

18. Lewis Nkosi, **Tasks and Masks** (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981), p. 65.

19. Ezekiel Mphahlele, **The African Image** (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 270.

20. **Ibid.**

21. **Ibid.**, p. 271.

22. Ayi Kwei Armah, "Larsony or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction", **The Positive Review** (Ife, Nigeria), No. 1 (1978), p. 11. "Larsony" is a play on the surname of the American critic Charles Larson (**The Emergence of African Fiction**), whose criticism Armah uses as his starting point.

23. Mphahlele, p. 271.

24. Robert Fraser, **The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah** (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. x.

25. Robert Fraser, "The American Background in **Why Are We So Blest?**", **African Literature Today**, 9, p. 45.

26. James Booth, "**Why Are We So Blest?** and the Limits of Metaphor", **Journal of Commonwealth Literature**, 15, No. 1 (1980), p. 63.

27. Bernth Lindfors, "Armah's Histories", **African Literature Today**, 11 (1980), p. 95.

28. **Ibid.**, p. 86.

29. TANU stands for "Tanganyika Nationalist Union", the ruling political party in Tanzania. **Ujamaa**, which translates as "togetherness", is the Swahili name of TANU's socialist philosophy.

30. Ayi Kwei Armah, "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific", **Presence Africaine**, No. 64 (1967), pp. 27.8.

31. Lindfors, pp. 90-1.

32. Terry Goldie, "A Connection of Images: The Structure of Symbols in **The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born**", **Kunapipi,** 1, No. 1 (1979), pp. 100-1, 96.

33. Simon Simonse, "African Literature: Between Nostalgia and Utopia", **Research in African Literatures,** 13, No. 1 (1982), p. 842.